

THE FINAL PURIFICATION

Why do we pray for deceased persons on the anniversary of their death, when we fervently hope that they are already with God face-to-face? From the beginning, the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered prayers for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, but why?

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are assured of their eternal salvation, but at death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the purity necessary to enter into the presence of God and the joy of heaven. Tradition gives the name Purgatory to this final act of purification of God's faithful ones.

The Church teaches the existence of a state of purification for those who die still clinging to self-centredness, but there is no time element, as we know it, beyond the grave. So, we don't have to imagine Purgatory as a long or even a short *time* of punishing purification in a cleansing fire after death. There is no time dimension for us after death.

There is no time element with God - only an eternal now. Beyond our mortal existence, time in the sense of past and future, does not exist. Purgatory could be the self-emptying moment of death itself when one experiences purification from all attachment to sin on entering into the Presence of God.

There is no time limitation on prayer. We can pray not only for present needs but also for future needs and for the needs of people in the past. All the prayers we have said, and will say in the future, request that the faithful deceased person surrender to God's mercy at the moment of death, and be received by God.

The Church assures us that it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for those who have died. We can believe that, on our recommendation through prayer, God gives the deceased person the choice at the moment of death, to choose light instead of darkness, good instead of evil, indeed the Supreme Good in three Persons.

So, we can believe that our Masses, prayers and penances, offered for persons who have died even long ago in our human measure of time, actually helped them at their moment of death, their Purgatory, before they came into the Presence of God.

Pope Benedict XVI, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, wrote just a few lines about the deceased that make full sense of our celebrating the anniversary of the death of our loved ones.

He wrote: "We know that the souls of those who have died are alive in the resurrected Body of the Lord." This is an astounding statement and a very consoling one, but it should come as no surprise if we have paid attention to the Church's public worship.

In the first preface of Easter, we hear about Jesus, "Dying, he destroyed our death. Rising, he restored our life." In the new English translation of the Mass, after, "The mystery of faith", we pray, "Save us, Saviour of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free."

So, those who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ their Saviour and have remained faithful to him through life until death are certainly alive in the resurrected Body of the Lord.

Cardinal Ratzinger continued to explain, “The Lord’s Body shelters them and carries them towards the common resurrection.” This is a refreshing way of expressing the Creed that we profess in the Sunday Mass, either the Nicene Creed: “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come,” or the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.”

The resurrected Body of the Lord, seated in glory at the right hand of God the Father, is the same Body of Christ that we receive sacramentally in Holy Communion. Cardinal Ratzinger concluded, “In this Body which we are permitted to receive, we remain close to one another, and we touch one another.”

This is why we celebrate the anniversary of the death of our loved ones with a Requiem Mass in which we receive the Blessed Sacrament of the Body of Christ. We renew our communion with the risen Lord and with all his faithful members, both living and deceased.

We need never lose our close personal contact with our deceased loved ones, whether husband or wife, father or mother, relative or friend. They are alive in the risen Lord who carries them towards the final resurrection of all those who have died in the peace of Christ.

Also, those who have died, while they can’t help their own salvation any longer, can and do pray for us who mercifully remember them. They and the Saints share with us on earth the perfect offering of Jesus Christ to his eternal Father. Let us offer our own lives with Jesus, for our deceased family members and friends and for all the dead.

As St Paul wrote to Timothy, “If we have died with him, then we shall live with him. If we hold firm, then we shall reign with him” (2 Tim 2:11).

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